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ABSTRACT

Some factors that should be considered when administering tests to adults include the following: (1) adults have a difficult time adapting to new things; (2) everyone resists change to some degree; (3) change requires new learning; (4) various things influence a person's ability to learn new things and make changes; (5) childhood events can influence adults' abilities to learn new things; (6) test anxiety can have a negative effect on resulting scores; (7) test anxiety begins as early as fourth grade; (8) scores on reading tests can be influenced by physical and psychological factors; (9) "intentionality" influences test scores; (10) a test administrator can negatively influence scores by the control of the test administration process; and (11) positive steps should be taken to influence the testing process and environment to ensure the most reliable scores for test takers. (KC)

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IMPROVING THE TEST ENVIRONMENT

Test Anxiety and the Unemployed Learner

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by

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Improving the Test Environment

When unemployed individuals enter the offices of organizations that provide help in finding employment they are taking an extreme personal risk. They have entered a process of life change. The two things adults do least well is make change and take risks. Sometimes change can immobilize an individual.

The most effective means to help the individual make change is to view it from the perspective of the person who is making the change. This is best done by helping that person bring reality into line with perceptions.

The resistance to change is not limited to the unemployed. All adults resist change to some degree or another. What are the reasons to resist a new experience, like seeking employment, that has the potential of giving a person more freedom and independence?

WHY PEOPLE RESIST CHANGE

* Personal loss - You lose what is known, what is real, and what may have been reality for several years

* Money - Employment may not provide what is currently available from a welfare grant.

* Satisfaction - The person knows what is familiar, may have a certain status in their family, and among friends. Why change?

* Responsibility - Having a job means responsibility. The person already has responsibilities and is not sure how the new ones will affect the old ones

* Authority - The unemployed person has no "boss" to make demands. The person might fear losing power when they must report to someone else.

* Working conditions - Need for new clothes, transportation, and interaction with other employees will all be new

* Status - The person wants to know if they will be treated differently by friends and family when they go to work.

Dealing with change means learning new things and it often starts at a service providers office. Filling out forms, having a interview, taking a reading test are all part of the learning process. Thus it is essential that staff who work with adults have some knowledge of how adults learn and make change so they can adapt the intake and testing procedures to help individuals be as successful as possible.

GENERALIZATIONS ON FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE ADULT LEARNING

FEAR OF FAILURE: Adults are especially sensitive to failure in new situations. This fear can lead them to do poorly on things like standardized tests. (Cronbach, 1970)

NO EXPERIENCE IS NEW: For an adult few experiences are new. They take a new situation and relate it to a previous one. It is important to have adults share what they know before assuming they have no frame of reference.

DISLIKES GET STRONGER: Research shows that as we age the things we dislike increase in intensity. If we have very negative attitudes about test-taking, the test administrator will have to deal with our non-acceptance of a reading score as an appropriate assessment tool. A person is not bad because they have strong dislikes, they are just being an adult.

ABILITY TO LEARN IS NOT IMPAIRED: The ability to learn is not impaired with age. Recent studies on 90 year olds showed no diminishing in the ability to learn new material. Learning can be influenced by such things as

eye sight, hearing loss, physical infirmities or other conditions. The wise staff member keeps these in mind during the assessment process.

ANSWERS SHOULD BE CORRECT: Adults expect the information they receive to be correct and to work for them. They are quite disrespectful of authority figures who try to bluff or are ill-prepared to deal with their questions.

VARIANCE IN ADULT GROUPS: When working with adult groups there is a wide variance in the age, experience, motivation, and goals of each person. While administering a standardized test needs to be consistent from person to person, the introduction, use, and opportunity to practice should take into account the differences in each person.

KEEP THE PERSON INVOLVED: When adults are involved in a process of decision making that affects them, they are more likely to agree with and act on the outcomes. Telling an adult is the least effective means to have that information incorporated into the person's life. Learning of any kind takes time and the sooner a person exerts some control over decisions the more likely the outcomes will be successful. This means that staff need to involve the unemployed in decisions related to their assessment (setting the date, time, etc.) (Macduff, 1985)

In addition to these general factors which influence adults who are attempting to make change in their life are some specific factors which are positively correlated to the person who takes enthusiastically to learning.

FACTORS INFLUENCING WILLINGNESS TO LEARN

1. If a person had parents' who read a great deal or were formally or self-educated they are more inclined to devote time to learning

2. When activity and achievement is stressed in childhood, the person is more apt to be interested in learning new things.

3. The more years of school completed the more interest in learning.

4. The higher the vocabulary used during a child's youth the more interest in learning.

5. A person satisfied with previous learning experiences is more willing to risk the change of a new experience.

6. Older children in a family are more apt to devote time to learning.

Knowing all these factors can help the staff plan the intake interview, how the tests will be administered, the most appropriate means to report the results of the test, and how to plan a strategy to enhance employability. There are factors which help adults make change: If a person feels a sense of personal gain, security, status, prestige, responsibility, opportunity for more money or better life conditions. Sometimes an individual can be affected by the change agent, in this case the staff. Clients can be positively inclined to learn new things if they like and respect the person who is the source of the change, have input into the process, see the change as improving the future, or if they decide this is the right time for change

It is important to remember that other factors can influence test scores and a person's willingness to learn the skills required to complete the intake process and work toward employability. Low intelligence, auditory defects, visual defects, physical conditions, neurological functions, deficiencies in hemispherical dominance, poor school records, and emotional or social program will influence test scores. (Gerberich, 1962) Those conditions cannot be ruled out as barriers to enhanced employability.

Test anxiety can influence the outcome on any reading assessment. The person administering a test must be sensitive to all the factors discussed

previously and to the entire process and environment in which an adult is asked to do something new and uncomfortable. An example would be completing a competency test.

Test anxiety occurs at a very early age. A group of 4th grade students were given a list of 43 anxiety symptoms and asked to indicate which words described their feelings when told they would be tested. These 8 and 9 year old children listed 12 anxiety feelings, on the average. Attitudes about testing are influenced by what teachers, parents, and other children say about it. (Cronbach, 1970) This is especially true for children from middle and upper socio-economic groups.

When testing an individual who has historically been a member of low socio-economic groups, it is important to remember that their attitude formation does not occur in the same manner as those from other groups. Children in lower socio-economic groups base their self-respect on the judgment of peers and not on adult authority. (Cronbach, 1970) They carry this attitude into adulthood and the testing situation.

Anxiety influences test results. In some cases it may compromise the accuracy of results. High anxiety is debilitating when the task is complex, like taking a standardized test. High anxiety can, however, increase performance quality when the task is a simple one. (Anderson, 1975)

Who is most susceptible to test anxiety? It is the person who has been out of the formal school environment for a year or two, is a non-native of the United States, is older, or an adult basic education student. (Anderson, 1975)

Reading scores can be influenced by any or all of the following items:

1. health
2. whether the person has eaten or not; and what they have eaten

3. noises in the testing room
4. broken pencil
5. disturbances in the testing room
6. poor school records
7. auditory defects
8. visual defects
9. physical defects
10. emotional or social problems (Cohen, 4/88)

It is important to remember that reading achievement is not one dimensional. Adults will exhibit different performances in different contexts. Intentionality is a key factor in helping adults deal with new situations. The adult's intention can determine their success on a test or in a program.

The scores on tests can be influenced by negative and positive factors. In some cases the factors are controlled by the person taking the test and in others they are outside the person's control. Many of them can be influenced by the person responsible for administering the test.

Test scores improve if the person . .

. . . knows they will get a job if they pass the test.

. . . expects passing the test to improve their self-respect.

. . . has an interest in or curiosity about the test.

. . . is in the habit of obeying authority figures.

. . . sees the test administrator as friendly.

. . . has the motivation to do well learned from childhood.

. . . understands why they will benefit from taking the test and doing well. This is the most important of all the factors for influencing scores.

Test scores are negatively influenced if the person. . .

. . . is tired and not motivated to do well.

. . . has problems outside the test situation that intrude on their thinking.

. . . is upset.

. . . takes the test at the wrong time Adults do best on learning exercises between 10:00 A.M. and 3:00 P.M.

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE TEST ANXIETY

CONDITIONS

1. Provide good ventilation and full spectrum lighting
2. Provide a place to write that allows all testing materials and personal items to be spread out.
3. Be sure everyone taking the test can see the person who is giving directions on how to take the test.
4. The room should be of modest size. Very large rooms are intimidating to test takers and can influence the scores.
5. Furniture should fit adults.

INCREASING THE RELIABILITY

1. One person should be in charge of testing for the organization. He/she can train others to administer, but should be the person who is ultimately responsible.
2. Monitor those taking the test to make sure they are following directions.
3. Encourage those who are taking the test to ask questions.

4. Never make false starts when you are administering the test.

5. When giving the test in group situations, do not accommodate late comers. Late entrances and necessary subsequent directions from the test administrator are too much of a disturbance. It could influence the scores of all those taking the test.

6. Directions on tests should be given singly. Example: "Put your name on line 17 on the answer sheet." Do not give running directions, "Put your name on 17, address on 18, phone number on 19 and 20."

7. Directions must be given exactly as they are provided from the publisher. Deviations from the instruction manual can influence the reliability of the test.

8. When test takers ask questions, the responses must not go beyond the scope of the ideas expressed in the standard directions.

9. Directions must be free of ambiguities.

10. Tests can be administered using tape recorder or video-taped instructions. Computerized tests provide the instructions for the test taker. A consideration for the use of computerized tests is the high degree of computer anxiety in adult populations. The combination of computer anxiety with test anxiety would likely negatively influence test scores and the job search process for the adult involved.

11. Practice manuals where adults have an opportunity to see how the test questions are written will positively influence the reliability of scores.

12. In administering the test the person should:
    -put the test taker at ease
    -smile
    -make statements of approval
    -do not show dissatisfaction
    -do not make flip or cute responses

13. Create a spirit of cooperation between the tester and the subject

14. Meeting with the person taking the test prior to the test will not negatively influence the outcome of the test. It has the advantage of helping the test taker and the test giver be people who know each other.

15. The best test administrators are:
    -intelligent
    -people with good judgment
    -sensitive to the reaction of others
    -accepting of scientific methods
    -people with psychological insight

SUMMARY

* Adults have a difficult time adapting to new things.

* Everyone resists change to some degree.

* Change requires new learning.

* There are factors which influence a persons ability to learn a new thing and make change.

* Childhood events can influence an adults ability to learn new things.

* Test anxiety can have a negative effect on resulting scores.

* Test anxiety begins as early as 4th grade.

* Scores on reading tests can be influenced by physical and psychological factors.

* "Intentionality" influences test scores

* A test administrator can negatively influence sores by their control of the test administration process.

* Positive steps should be taken to influence the testing process and environment to insure the most reliable scores for test takers.

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